

The problems that plagued the Jayhawks at quarterback in 2005 resurfaced in 2006. Kansas lost at Toledo in double overtime, and an overtime loss at Nebraska was the first of four straight Big 12 losses. Meier couldn't stay healthy. At 3-5 and back home for a meeting with Colorado on the last Saturday of October, Mangino watched in disgust as his offense stumbled to 90 yards on 29 first-half snaps. "They had nothing going," Keegan recalls. "I mean *nothing*." Meier was injured, and Barmann had thrown a pair of ugly first-half interceptions. Playing a bend-but-don't-break scheme, Young's defense kept things from getting out of hand—limiting the Buffaloes to three short field goals. By this time, Reesing had resigned himself to the fact he wouldn't be playing in 2006. During the week, Mangino hadn't even mentioned the possibility of calling No. 5's number.

"All these guys on the team were saying, 'Don't worry. They're not going to burn your redshirt this late in the year,'" says Reesing. "I went into that game thinking there was no way on earth I was going to play."

The second quarter was winding down, and in the press box, Bill Self had made his way to the perch from which the assembled media was watching the debacle. Basketball practice had started—now there was something to get excited about!—and the KU coach, as is his custom at home football games, was chatting up beat writers and columnists. Self was in the middle of a story when Keegan noticed Reesing warming up behind the KU bench. "I bet they're going to rip the redshirt off of him," Keegan thought. Mangino had seen enough. The true freshman was trading in his ball cap for a helmet.

"Coach called me over right before halftime and said, 'Todd, we're going to start you in the second half,'" Reesing recalls. "He looked at me and said, 'Put it this way. You can't do any worse.' I guess that was his way of trying to get me to relax. My jaw dropped, my eyes got real wide, and I'm like, 'O.K. this is actually happening. Relax and have fun.'"

Because they won the coin toss and had deferred, the Jayhawks received the second-half kickoff. On the first snap of his college career, Reesing handed off to Jon Cornish, who ran for five yards. On second down, looking to get its new quarterback an easy completion, KU called a play-action rollout, but the ball was tipped and fell incomplete. Somewhere, a certain Texas A&M assistant had to be snickering. On third down ...

"We were trying to run simple slant routes on the inside and outside," Reesing says. "I tried to thread the needle. The guy was open, but the ball got tipped by a linebacker who was filling the passing lane and fell into the arms of a safety."

A stadium that moments earlier had been buzzing over the surprise entrance of a freshman savior suddenly went silent. As he jogged off the field, Reesing couldn't remember a worse feeling. What fun!

Mangino could only laugh. "His interception looked good," he remembers thinking. On KU's next possession, Reesing and the offense stayed on the field for eight snaps before punting. Then, on his third series, he essentially took over the game. First came a 42-yard completion to running back Jake Sharp, and three plays later Reesing hooked up with Cornish for a 22-yard touchdown. The Jayhawks needed only four plays and 2:10 to cover the 76 yards. Now *this* was fun. Reesing was settling in, though he admits, "I didn't really know what to do, what to expect. I just went off of reaction."

On the fourth play of the fourth quarter, Reesing put Kansas ahead with a three-yard touchdown run, then capped a seven-play, 53-yard drive with a five-yard touchdown pass to tight end Derek Fine. In a mere 11:38, he had rallied the Jayhawks from a 9-0 hole to a 20-9 advantage.

Memorial Stadium was rocking, at least as rocking as it could be with the remnants of an announced crowd of 39,313. When he wasn't making throws, Reesing was keeping plays alive with his feet. He was cutting another highlight video. He was, in a word, electric.

Asked for his impressions from his first college game, Reesing says, "The speed of the game is faster than high school, and there's a lot more to think about. Play calls are more complex, you have checks, you have to read defenses. When it's all happening so fast and you're just trying to keep your breath without your heart rate going too high, I didn't think that much. I just reacted and played football. That's why I scrambled a lot. I actually graded out pretty poorly as a quarterback."

Not surprisingly, he wasn't without his shaky moments. Three plays before his touchdown run, he fumbled, but left tackle Anthony Collins fell on the ball. Then, on the snap after he scrambled for 63 yards to the Colorado three-yard line, Reesing fumbled again; Buffs free safety Ryan Walters picked up the loose ball and scampered 95 yards for a touchdown, and the Kansas faithful watched the final 3:17 of a 20-15 victory with sweaty palms.

"It was surreal," says Reesing. "Two days before, I was signaling plays in and hanging out at practice. Now I was the one who brought us back from a deficit and kept us where we had a chance to go to a bowl game. If we had lost that game, we would've been out of bowl contention."

The line was respectable enough: seven carries for 93 yards and a touchdown (the 63-yarder would be the longest of a career during which Reesing was credited with 335 rushes) to go with seven completions in 11 attempts for 106 yards, with two touchdowns and the buzz-killing interception. Most important, directing an attack that piled up 251 yards on 32 snaps, Reesing had almost tripled KU's first-half production.

Nobody could have predicted it, but a legend was born. And in the days after the comeback kid rallied the Jayhawks to their first Big 12 victory of 2006, the legend was burnished. Word spread that Reesing had been spotted on Massachusetts Avenue on the night before the 1 o'clock Saturday kickoff. True enough, Reesing says now, but could you really fault the kid? He was a 19-year-old freshman who was enjoying college life. He wasn't the only KU football player seen on the streets of downtown Lawrence that Friday night. Some of his teammates who were out on the town knew they would be playing the next day. And hadn't Reesing been told more than once that there was no way his redshirt would be pulled in the ninth game of the season? Plus, it was Halloween weekend, and Reesing was eager to trot out his Scooby-Doo costume.

So, yeah, he was decked out in orange from head to toe as he strolled up and down Mass Avenue, but that's where the story starts to get hazy. Reports ranged from his dancing on the bar at Brothers to his downing shots into the wee hours to his being found slumped over the wheel of his car at six o'clock on Saturday morning, motor running. Just to set the record straight, Reesing did go out with friends (and teammates), had a few laughs, caught some curious looks and called it an early night. Sounding somewhat regretful, he says his night on the town was *not* the third coming of Joe Namath and Max McGee.

"I've heard more versions of this story than you'd ever believe," Reesing says. "It would be funny if there were a better version, but I guess the one everybody has heard has grown over the years."

As it turns out, that last weekend in October would be the highlight of Reesing's freshman season. Meier returned for a 41-10 victory over Iowa State; Reesing pitched in with a touchdown through the air and another on the ground. He was surprised he never took a snap during a 39-20 win over Kansas State, and he got only mop-up duty in a 42-17 loss at Missouri. He also got an eye-opening introduction to the rivalry.

"Coming from Texas, you really don't know about the Kansas- Missouri game," Reesing says. "But once I heard all the history and the background on the rivalry and heard all the hatred ..." He pauses. "Until we got to Columbia and I heard all the things that were said, you just don't understand the passion that these people have for the rivalry and how much it is more like a war. That's why the term *Border War* is appropriate."

There would be no bowl game at the end of a 6-6 season, but the significance of the last four games of 2006 wasn't lost on Mangino. "It worked out perfectly," he says, "because in 2007 Todd wasn't a rookie. If we had not played him in 2006, he would not have been prepared to play the way he did in 2007. If we had started him as a rookie in 2007, you wouldn't be talking to me about this book."

As his record-setting career was winding down, Reesing was often asked if he regretted burning the redshirt. The answer was always a resounding no. "Going into Week 1 [of 2007], I didn't feel the nerves of a first-year player because I had been in some games, played twice on the road," he says. "I had been in some tough situations that helped me mature a lot quicker. I felt like I had a whole year under me, even though I only played in a couple of games."

Yet as the calendar turned to 2007, not even the cocksure Reesing would have been brazen enough to suggest the Jayhawks were about to embark on the greatest season in program history.